

International

India opposition leader Gandhi vows 'final assault on poverty'

Rahul Gandhi promises basic income for India's poorest if becomes PM

NEW DELHI: Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi yesterday vowed a "final assault on poverty" in India if elected prime minister in May, promising a minimum income for tens of millions of the country's poorest. The Congress Party leader, broadly seen as trailing the incumbent Narendra Modi in the race for top office, described the scheme to pay a guaranteed basic income of \$1,000 a year to 50 million poor families as the largest of its kind on Earth.

The sop to voters comes less than three weeks before Indians start casting their ballots in mammoth elections that stretch nearly six weeks until May 19. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party routed Congress at the last general election in 2014 and his supporters hope the Hindu nationalist leader can deliver another crushing victory.

But Gandhi is trying to close the gap, promising among other things a safety net for Indians living beneath the poverty line in the world's second-most populous nation. "People have suffered in the last five years. We will give justice to them," the scion of the Gandhi-Nehru dynasty told reporters in Delhi. "It is on this day that the Congress

Party launched its final assault on poverty. It will be the world's largest minimum income scheme."

Gandhi, whose father, grandmother and great-grandfather were all prime ministers, has attacked Modi's economic record, accusing him of failing to create jobs for the nation's youth or aid desperate farmers. His proposed cash handouts for the poor are seen as modeled loosely on universal basic income, a concept attracting growing interest around the world. UBI - supported by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg among others as a way to reduce inequality - involves people being given a flat lump sum by the state instead of subsidies and social security payments.

It has been tried out in several countries including Finland and Kenya, and has been promised by the ruling party of the small northern Indian state of Sikkim as well as Italy's new populist government. Modi has already unveiled a raft of sweeteners for farmers and the middle class in Asia's third-largest economy, hoping to deflect opposition salvos over his 2014 campaign promise to create "good days" for all. — AFP



AGARTALA: Rahul Gandhi, president of India's main opposition Congress party speaks during a public rally ahead of India's general elections at Khumuiwng, on the outskirts of Agartala, the capital of northeastern state of Tripura. — AFP

Forget Taj Mahal what about Modi rally? India markets election tourism

NEW DELHI: India's frenetic cities, historical monuments, tasty food, and beautiful scenery may be among the biggest attractions for foreign tourists. But with election fever hitting India, a few of them are prepared to forgo some of that - and the elephant ride - to meet an election candidate or attend a political rally.

The world's biggest democracy, with about 900 million voters, is set to decide in April-May whether Prime Minister Narendra Modi gets a second term following his thumping victory in 2014, and that gives the Indian tourism industry a different way to market the country. Some Indian tour companies are courting international visitors with week-long 'election tourism' packages that would try to combine some traditional sightseeing with access to political campaigning.

The packages were first tested during the 2012 state elections in the Western state of Gujarat and have now mushroomed nationwide. "The Indian election is like a festival," founder of Election Tourism India and Chairman of Gujarat Tourism Corporation Society Manish Sharma told Reuters. Election campaigns and rallies in India can be spectacular in terms of scale, reflecting the power of fundraising for the state and national political parties.

Events and rallies headlined by India's Prime Minister

Narendra Modi, the head of his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, Amit Shah, and the opposition Congress party's Priyanka Gandhi Vadra have generated a lot of interest, Sharma said. The Ahmedabad-Gujarat based Election Tourism India, which works with more than 35 tour companies across India, has received nearly 3,500 bookings for election packages from outside India, he said.

The packages consist of popular tourist destinations, political rallies and interactions with election candidates and other local politicians. The length of the election - it takes more than five weeks for everyone to be able to vote - also provides tour operators with plenty of options. The trips offered range from 5 to 8 days, and offer visits to a wide variety of places. The packages are not expected to appeal to the average tourist but more for those who are inclined in politics, such as political students, journalists and researchers. — Reuters

India, Pakistan spar over conversion of two Hindu girls

NEW DELHI: India and Pakistan are quarrelling over reports of an alleged kidnapping and religious conversion of two Hindu girls in mostly Muslim Pakistan last week. The spat began on Sunday when India's Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj tweeted that she had asked the country's high commissioner in Islamabad to send a report on a news article on the allegations, a rare public intervention by a top Indian official in the neighbor's domestic affairs.

Pakistani police said they had registered a complaint of kidnapping and robbery by the teenagers' parents and that arrests could be made yesterday. Pakistan's Information and Broadcasting Minister Fawad Chaudhry said the country was "totally behind the girls", but asked Hindu-majority India to look after its own minority Muslims. "Madam Minister, I am happy that in the Indian administration we have people who care for minority rights in other countries," Chaudhry replied to Swaraj's tweet.

"I sincerely hope that your conscience will allow you to stand up for minorities at home as well. Gujarat and Jammu must weigh heavily on your soul." Later in a press conference on Sunday, he referred to religious riots in Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state of Gujarat in 2002 during which more than 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed. In Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, Pakistan accuses India of human rights violations, a charge New Delhi denies.

An Indian foreign ministry source cited three more instances of forceful marriages of Hindu or Sikh women in Pakistan in the past two years and said that the government had raised "intimidation of Sikhs, Hindus, and desecration of their places of worship" with Pakistan on various occasions. The Indian government run by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will seek a second term in a general election starting next month. Modi has taken a tougher stand towards Pakistan in the past five years. — Reuters

Yemen: World's worst humanitarian crisis with thousands dead

SANAA: The war in Yemen has left thousands dead and triggered the world's worst humanitarian crisis, according to the United Nations. The war between Houthi rebels and pro-government troops escalated in March 2015, when a Saudi-led military coalition intervened against the rebels.

Civilians on front line

Around 10,000 people-mostly civilians-have been killed and more than 60,000 wounded since the Saudi-led coalition joined the conflict, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). But the exact numbers are not known and aid groups warn the toll is likely to be significantly higher, with Action Against Hunger putting it at more than 57,000.

On March 18, 2019, the Norwegian Refugee Council said that civilian casualties have risen in Yemen despite a three-month-old truce in the vital aid port of Hodeida. According to French aid group Action Contre la Faim, 3.3 million people have been displaced within Yemen. The country has also been ravaged by cholera, which has killed more than 2,500 people since April 2017. Around 1.2 million suspected cases have been reported, according to the WHO.

'Hell on earth' for children

The UN children's fund (UNICEF) has regularly pointed to the devastating effects of the conflict on children. "It

is a living hell for every boy and girl in Yemen," it said in November 2018. It said 1.8 million aged less than five are suffering from acute malnutrition. Save the Children said that between April 2015 and October 2018 some 85,000 children may have died of severe malnutrition or related diseases. Others have been killed by combat.

Lost generation

According to the UN, two million of the country's seven million children of school age go without education in Yemen. More than 2,500 schools are out of use, of which two thirds have been damaged in attacks, 27 percent closed and seven percent used by the military or as shelters for displaced people. Largely due to their families' poverty, two out of five girls are married before the age of 15 and three quarters before 18, according to UNICEF. Thousands of boys have been recruited as child soldiers.

'Worst' humanitarian crisis

In March 2017, Stephen O'Brien, the UN's under-secretary general for humanitarian affairs, said Yemen was the scene of "the largest humanitarian crisis in the world". The United Nations warned in February 2019 the situation was getting even worse. "An estimated 80 percent of the population - 24 million-require some form of humanitarian or protection assistance, including 14.3 million who are in acute need," the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said.

The number of people in acute need is "a staggering 27 percent higher than last year", it said, adding two-thirds of the country was "already pre-famine". According to Action Contre la Faim 16 million people lack access to water and sanitation and basic health care. Fifty percent of Yemen's clinics are closed and more than 70 percent do not have a regular supply of medicines.



SANAA: Armed Yemeni men raise their weapons as they gather near the capital Sanaa to show their support to the Shiite Houthi movement against the Saudi-led intervention. — AFP

'War crimes'

In March 2018, rights group Amnesty International accused Western countries of supplying arms to Riyadh and its allies, who could stand guilty of war crimes in Yemen. Last August a UN expert mission concluded that all warring parties had potentially committed "war crimes". — AFP

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